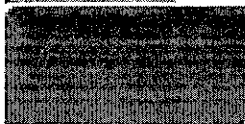


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Rare canoe to be dug up in Oconee

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Cherokee Indians forded the Chattooga River in a dugout canoe deep in the wilderness of what is now Oconee County during the mid-1700s.

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About 250 years later, a 46-year-old Atlanta auto mechanic was hiking and swimming on a section he'd visited since he was a boy. This time, Peter Peteet saw a strange piece of wood poking up through a sandy beach. He and four buddies from high school started digging with their hands.

"The four of us kept going over the possibilities of what this could be," he said. "We thought maybe it was a trough for carrying water somewhere."

It turned out to be a 32-foot-long pirogue — a dugout canoe made from a single log. It may be the first found in the Upstate, and Oconee historians are eager to make it the centerpiece of the new Oconee Heritage Center.

But first, an army of volunteers will dig it out of the sand Friday, which is easier said than done. Those directing the recovery aren't sure how much it weighs, and water from the Chattooga is high again, covering most of the canoe.

Pirogues are fairly common in the Lowcountry, where the water is slow and flat, said Jim Spirek, deputy state underwater archaeologist. Researchers hope the canoe will offer new insights into the early settlement of the Upstate.

"It's unique because it was used to navigate mountain waterways," he said. "It will give us another view of what was navigated at the time."

Researchers will have to figure out whether it is actually a Cherokee canoe or if it was built by early European settlers. Buzz Williams said the canoe is just downstream from a well-known Cherokee fording point, which seals the deal for him.

Cherokee archaeologists will be there when it is pulled out of the sand. They could not

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be reached for comment Wednesday.

"Nothing like this has been found this far north on the Savannah River system," he said. "Everything points to it being Cherokee, but even if it's not, it's a significant find."

Carbon dating of a small piece of wood chipped from the canoe indicates it was made about 1760, give or take 40 years, said Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy. It is made from yellow pine and is very narrow.

The conservancy is funding the extraction, but nearly all of the labor and materials have been donated by Upstate groups or businesses. Similar extractions in Florida have cost between \$30,000 and \$40,000, Williams said, which forced the small non-profit conservation group to rely on volunteer labor.

The canoe is considered the property of the state of South Carolina because it was found on this side of the river, but the Chattooga is also a wild and scenic river owned by the federal government. The conservancy got involved when the group became worried that neither the state nor federal officials had the money to preserve the canoe and were not working quickly enough, Williams said.

"The two agencies didn't know how to handle it," he said.

Since that time, officials with both the USDA Forest Service and the state have worked hard to preserve the canoe, he added. Mike Crane, district ranger for the Sumter National Forest, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

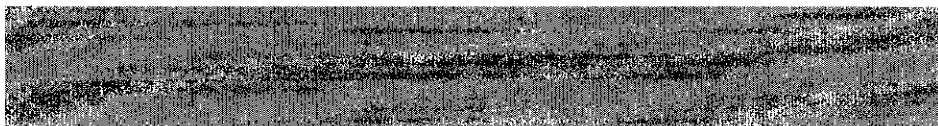
The recovery and preservation is being directed by the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. Jonathan Leader, director of the institute, will study the canoe.

After it is extracted, it will be preserved at the new museum.

"This will put us on the map," said the museum's Nick Gambrell. "It will be our greatest exhibit."

But the public won't be able to see it anytime soon. Gambrell said to properly preserve the canoe, it has to sit in a chemical for one year. The museum is scheduled to open this fall, and Gambrell is hoping for a grand opening — with the canoe — in 2005.

Jason Zacher covers the environment and natural resources. He can be reached at 298-4272.



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